

So, What Happened in Kabul Today? Flexible Learning in Conflict and Social Justice Programs at the Australian National University

Dr. Patrick Kilby, Coordinator, Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) Program, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
patrick.kilby@anu.edu.au

Dr Elizabeth A. Beckmann, Educational Designer, Flexible Learning Project, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia elizabeth.beckmann@anu.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

A major challenge for people working in areas of conflict and social justice in developing countries is finding high-level opportunities to engage in structured, critical reflection on their work, and to learn from their peers. This paper describes how open learning and flexible delivery in the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD) at the Australian National University (ANU) is giving development workers in the field the chance for advanced study in a stimulating and peer-supported way that not only enriches their career functionality and long-term prospects, but also enhances their day-to-day activities.

For many interested in this conference theme, the focus will be on open learning as a tool to help victims of conflict and marginalisation. In contrast, our paper considers the opportunities for open, flexible learning to support those working with such groups. The MAAPD program offers a blended approach, combining the use of online learning platforms and streamed audio lectures with opportunities for short intensive anchor courses at ANU's Canberra campus. Using the accounts of MAAPD students who have been studying off-campus at the same time as working in areas of conflict across the world, this paper examines the benefits of open learning to development workers, showing that it not only provides individual students with opportunities for structured and supported reflection as they apply theory to practice, but also allows them to incorporate into their work insights from their peers elsewhere with an immediacy that directly benefits the communities with which they are working. This concept is well known in a developed country context (Harasim 2000), but extending it to students working in developing countries introduces a new dimension, whereby the emphasis on social justice content that is central to the MAAPD is directly linked to the delivery mechanism.

We will describe how students can bring their day-to-day experiences of conflict and social justice issues in places such as Afghanistan, Colombia or East Timor to their ANU 'class', thoughtfully reflecting on the 'real life' case studies in which they are living in online workshops with their peers and in more formal assignments. These off-campus students can access ANU's research community and fellow students in Canberra, ask about similar situations of conflict in other countries, and, in real time, consider the potential outcomes of different strategies to deal with that conflict. This paper thus advances the arguments of McClellan and Dominguez (2006) regarding the importance of social justice curricula in challenging the status quo, contending that delivery mechanisms are also important in bringing immediacy and relevance to learning experiences. However, the need for immediacy can itself be a drawback, with problems still to be overcome in matching the technology available in Canberra with capacity in the developing countries or remote areas of Australia where our off-campus students are based.

EDUCATIONAL DESIGN FOR FLEXIBLE LEARNING

The Need for Open Learning in Development Studies

A major benefit of well-structured flexible learning is that the student's effort and output can be made immediately relevant in the workplace. Yet, in a demanding academic program at the postgraduate level, isolation from one's lecturers, fellow students and resources can be a significant disadvantage. There are also, of course, a myriad of technical issues to be overcome in delivering such programs directly to students living and working in regions undergoing conflict, as well as a need to understand the significant social and cultural

challenges of living in such areas that confront students daily. Despite these issues, the use of flexible learning for advanced studies when students are located in areas of conflict and social injustice provides unique opportunities for them to reflect on their work as they learn and, through the networking fostered by the program, to consider innovative solutions to identified problems. This approach also enables students to reflect on the application of sometimes abstract or theoretical concepts to the situations in which they find themselves, and provides an immediate reality check about the relevance of material being taught.

ANU's MAAPD program commenced in 2002 and has steadily grown and adapted to the needs of existing and potential students. The program strongly emphasises community development and offers specialisations that give, for example, a 'gender and development', 'conflict and development', 'society and environment', or 'indigenous policy' focus. All students undertake social mapping and social impact courses, at least one advanced course in their specialisation, and several electives (including opportunities to undertake an internship or research project). The practical focus on current development issues is paramount, as all lecturers are also active practitioners in the development field. In educational terms, the program takes a strongly constructivist approach, with students encouraged and enabled to negotiate meaning in the context of their own experiences, and assessment focussed on real-life development problems (Mishra 2002).

The MAAPD focus on providing opportunities for off-campus students recognises, as Cookson (2002) suggests, that the fastest-growing market sector is postgraduate education delivered via the Internet to working men and women. About half the enrolled students are now studying off-campus, including development workers based in Uganda, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, East Timor, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal, Colombia and Panama, as well as in remote Australian indigenous communities. (We also have students in other Australian cities, Britain and Canada looking to future careers in development.) It is essential, therefore, that MAAPD courses are designed to ensure that intended learning outcomes are as attainable by students off-campus as by those on-campus, and that the learning experiences of both groups are as rich as possible. Central to this is the need for effective and accessible technology for those studying online (Volery and Lord 2000).

Flexible Learning in the MAAPD

The first requisite of a flexible learning strategy is that it is indeed flexible! To provide off-campus students with resources that can be used where and when the students need them requires a high reliance on technology. However, technology in the Asia Pacific region is a known limit on the effectiveness of online education (Marginson 2004), as our students attest:

On-line chat lines were not very successful in Papua New Guinea (PNG). It was often hard enough getting an Internet line but keeping it open long enough to download large parcels of information, such as audio files, or to engage in meaningful chat was difficult, if not impossible.

In East Timor it takes several hours to download the lecture. I only have internet access at work – one dial-up line for 25 people. I don't even have a phone line at home [so] I can only use the Internet for study purposes on weekends.

For this reason, a recent review of the educational design of MAAPD courses, carried out with the support of ANU's Flexible Learning Project (FLP), took into account the technological constraints and realities for off-campus students, especially those working in countries where online options may vary greatly in availability or quality. Moreover, the FLP advocated the need to consider not only the hardware and software connected to the Internet but also "a more comprehensive array of . . . instruction-related elements . . . to enable interaction with and among students, and between students and the content to be learned" (Cookson 2002). The FLP thus helped MAAPD lecturers redesign learning activities to provide authentic and equivalent learning experiences for both on- and off-campus students, through a more flexible and student-focused use of educational technologies. This has seen the introduction, or more effective use, of:

- course-specific password-protected websites on ANU's learning management system (currently WebCT 4.1) to provide all resource material (e.g. readings, lectures) online;

- resources available in different formats (e.g. URLs, pdf files, streamed audio, narrated PowerPoints, emails, CD-ROMs) to meet students' needs under different technology and access constraints;
- small- or large-group discussion forums hosted on individual password-protected websites on ANU's online collaboration environment Alliance (based on the open-source Sakai software); and
- assessment strategies that provide authentic tasks, incorporate significant flexibility of content or approach, and are weighted towards online rather than in-class participation.

In addition, with the development field especially notorious for its 'grey literature' (Posnett and Baulkwill, 1982), and off-campus students often relying almost exclusively on online resources, MAAPD lecturers are making full use of the ANU's capacity to provide online library resources, online information literacy training (so students can more effectively use databases and search engines, for example) and online repositories of project reports and similar 'grey' material.

EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT: CASE STUDY EVIDENCE

So how effective is the MAAPD program in providing value-added learning to students who are also development workers in places where conflict and social justice issues are paramount? Evidence is available from the experiences of MAAPD off-campus students who were working in diverse development situations while studying, based on their in-depth responses to open-ended interview questions.

Removing Barriers to Learning

All MAAPD students report benefits from online access to recordings of lectures attended by on-campus students, to relevant readings, and to staff. Alternative resource formats provide more options:

I can take lectures with me on my mp3 player when I am travelling [in remote Australia], listening in doctors' waiting rooms, on public transport, on my way to and from work—invaluable for this time-poor student. I log in anywhere for my reading materials, or to post [discussion] responses. My lecturers have been extremely accessible by email.

Applying Theory and Tools to Practice

For development workers in the field, a significant benefit of open learning at an advanced level is the opportunity to learn about theories or specific tools, trial them immediately, then either adapt or discard them as appropriate. The sense of immediacy is all-important:

... flexible delivery of the MAAPD enabled me to apply the learning directly to my work [in PNG]. Had I taken time off to attend full-time study in Canberra, I would not have had this opportunity to apply principles and practices from the coursework.

One off-campus student was working as an advisor on forest management in PNG, which is subject to intense local conflict based on landowners' arguable claims to benefits and the need to preserve traditional resources. Such contested agendas and ownership rights are a source of ongoing, and sometimes violent, dispute. In this context, the student initially felt he "simply did not understand the social issues well enough to make ... a meaningful contribution to improving the situation". However, courses on social mapping and social impact assessment provided tools immediately applicable to logging feasibility studies, enabling him to better identify and manage potential conflicts. He found the immediacy of informed feedback very valuable:

I constantly tested my ideas and used the material I was working on in assignments ... assessed by lecturers who also have practical experience. I am not sure these were new approaches, but it was certainly good to have ... feedback.

Another development context common in areas of conflict concerns transitional justice, where legal systems are moving between traditional and more modern practices of justice (Hassall 2005) (Bell and O'Rourke 2007). The course on Conflict and Development provided this same student, now working in Afghanistan, with a more coherent understanding of the underlying issues, especially the challenge of understanding the transition from Sharia law:

"The society [the Afghans] aspire to will simply not accommodate some of the cultural and traditional aspects that exist at present". Being able to study off-campus and engage theory with practice on a daily basis in very different development settings has, for this student, demonstrated the universal applicability of learning:

The MAAPD has made me better at recognising the nuances of conflict in different cultures ... and more critical about my own perceptions. I now question the potentially simplistic explanations for some intractable cultural issues.

Other reports of direct and near-immediate application of MAAPD learning include:

- An Australian student working in Bangladesh on a World Heritage site insisting on a full social impact assessment of the possible effects of relocating communities, increasing awareness and remediation of potential sources of conflict;
- A student on an MAAPD internship with a United Nations Environment Programme Regional Office in Brazil asked with using newly-learned knowledge to evaluate the region's gender, poverty and environment activities;
- A student working on gender issues in Egypt learning how to distinguish between practical and strategic needs and adapting gender analysis tools to new local empowerment frameworks; and
- A student working in Nepal using their international NGO employer as a case study in an online forum considering the legitimacy of NGOs (Atack 1999), with the ensuing discussion changing the student's and co-workers perspectives, which enabled better management of the relationship between that NGO and its client local communities, and allayed a situation of potential conflict.

Interactions with Peers and Lecturers

Within the MAAPD, loosely structured interactions between and among students and lecturers enable the 'frank and fearless' exchanges of information and ideas that arguably provide the most important learning opportunities: "The biggest benefit of attending lectures [on-campus] is the discussion". The drawback for off-campus students, therefore, is the loss of face-to-face engagement with lecturers and peers, and the 'immediacy and energy' thus engendered (Meyer 2003). To address this, MAAPD courses have always provided substitute virtual discussion/feedback opportunities:

... feedback is invaluable when we are in the thick of trying to get things done within the prevailing environment and constrained by our own limited experience. I valued any feedback I could get, especially when I was doing work using new (to me) anthropological approaches. (PNG)

Online discussion forums require more educational design and technological support than emails, but foster peer support by allowing isolated students to bring their field experiences into the virtual classroom:

Reading posts from other students and the issues they are struggling with makes me realise that we are struggling with similar issues (conflicting interests, culture etc) ... that in itself is very useful. (Australian Indigenous communities)

I was able to learn about experiences from all over the world, especially those from Australia and the Asia Pacific region on which I had very limited knowledge before MAAPD. (Egypt)

It is often the little issues that arise from discussions and general chat that fill in gaps in what we are doing, and make a difference to the overall work that we as practitioners are able to provide. (PNG)

The online discussions give me the precious opportunity of directly discussing with my course mates [my work] activities ... in the framework of the current debates and thinking and therefore gaining from someone else experiences. (Nepal)

Planning for effective integration, and the participation of lecturers in that process, is the most influential variable affecting learning with asynchronous communication tools (Funaro and Montell 1999). The use of 'threaded' discussions increases the amount of time students spend on course objectives and on reflection (Meyer, 2003), with meaningful discourse

improved by facilitator guidelines, evaluation rubrics and posting protocols (Gilbert and Dabbagh, 2005). In the MAAPD, online discussion forums are now designed for all students—regardless of whether they attend lectures on-campus—and aim to facilitate peer learning, with lecturers serving as additional sources. Thoughtful design is essential, however, as online dialogue arising from classroom discussions may sometimes serve merely to reinforce the isolation of off-campus students. We are currently trialling different online discussion formats (some highly structured with groups of four to six students and specific assessment-focused objectives, others with less structure open to 60 or more students). Already we are finding the quality of online discussion, with its more reflective and equitable opportunities, can easily surpass the expected standards of in-class discussions.

Benefits to Co-Workers and Host Communities

A real bonus of advanced open learning for development workers in areas of conflict is that it provides a structured context for reflecting on real-life problems in real-time, with benefits accruing not only to the students themselves but also to their co-workers and host communities:

MAAPD changed the whole way I did my work at the time and . . . it certainly changed the way [my co-workers] looked on the impacts of their work. [PNG]

Working with indigenous communities, knowledge acquired through MAAPD, such as social networks and the role of NGOs, was shared in a participative manner with co-workers. [Panama]

The development benefits of an open learning program serving people working in development are also significant. Because the skills learned are being applied in a day-to-day situation when they are being taught, they are more easily carried forward into new work contexts:

I continue to use the principles of social impact assessment in my everyday work now as a 'new lens' to evaluate ... projects (Indigenous Australia).

The MAAPD changed the context of my working substantially and has enabled me to . . . translate what I do into other cultures and contexts. (Afghanistan)

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the provision of a development studies advanced education program to people working in areas of conflict and problems of social justice. ANU's MAAPD program provides high-quality postgraduate courses available through open and flexible learning to on-campus students in Canberra and off-campus students anywhere in the world. Development workers living in areas of conflict and human rights abuse can not only continue their career development while remaining in the field, but also engage in stimulating high-level discourse with their development practitioner peers as they apply theory to practice. Moreover, host communities benefit from having a development worker who has greater access to expertise, experience and support, and a reduced sense of isolation.

The MAAPD program is still 'under construction' in terms of fully meeting the needs of students working in areas that are difficult not only politically but also in terms of technological access. However, already we are finding the opportunity to bring their real world situation to the virtual classroom has enabled students not only to keep in touch with current development thinking but also to allow the knowledge and experiences of lecturers and fellow students to 'shadow' everyday problems in their challenging workplaces. The outcome is a more enriched experience for all.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the off-campus MAAPD students who freely shared their experiences.

References

- Atack, I. (1999), 'Four Criteria of Development NGO Legitimacy ', *World Development* 27 (5), 855-64.
- Bell, C. and O'Rourke, C. (2007), 'The People's Peace? Peace Agreements, Civil Society, and Participatory Democracy', *International Political Science Review*, 28 (3), 293-324.
- Cookson, P. (2002), 'Online Postgraduate Education: Some reflections', *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 3 (2), 1492-3831.
- Funaro, G. M. and Montell, F. (1999), 'Pedagogical roles and implementation guidelines for online communication tools' *Asynchronous Learning Network Magazine*, 3(2) 1-8. Retrieved January 2002 http://www.aln.org/alnweb/magazine/vol3_issue2/funaro.htm
- Gilbert, P. K. and Dabbagh, N. (2005) 'How to structure online discussions for meaningful discourse: a case study.' *British Journal of Educational Technology* 36 (1), 5-18.
- Harasim, L. (2000), 'Shift happens: Online education as a new paradigm in learning', *Internet and Higher Education*, 3, 41-61.
- Hassall, G. (2005), 'Peace Agreements in the Pacific Islands', paper given at Regional Workshop on Conflict Prevention & Peace-building in the Pacific, Nadi, 25-27 April.
- Marginson, S. (2004), 'Don't Leave Me Hanging on the Anglophone: The Potential for Online Distance Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific Region ', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 58 (2/3), 74-113.
- McClellan, R. and Dominguez, R. (2006), 'The uneven march toward social justice: Diversity, conflict, and complexity in educational administration programs', *Journal of Educational Administration* 44 (3), 225-38.
- Meyer, K. A. (2003). 'Face-To-Face Versus Threaded Discussions: The Role of Time and Higher-Order Thinking', *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 7(3): 55-65. http://www.sloan-.org/publications/jaln/v7n3/pdf/v7n3_meyer.pdf
- Mishra, S. (2002), 'A design framework for online learning environments', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 33 (4), 493-96.
- Posnett, N.W. & Baulkwill, W.J. (1982), 'Working with Non-Conventional Literature', *Journal of Information Science*, 5 (4): 121-130.
- Volery, T. and Lord, D. (2000), 'Critical Success Factors in Online Education.' *International Journal of Educational Management*, 14 (5), 216-23.